

Pepco claims it's now ready for the winter

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Montgomery County Councilman Roger Berliner (D.-Dist. 1) is pleased with Pepco's preparation for the coming winter months but has vowed to stay on top of the energy distribution company following a year of record snowfall and summer rain that left more than 300,000 county residents without power for days. Pepco's new \$265.5 million reliability plan promises a massive tree-trimming operation and updated technology to shorten the duration of outages.

"I have seen their reliability plan, and I have visual evidence of their tree-trimming work," Berliner said.

The former environmental and energy lawyer has been an outspoken critic of Pepco's reliability of service and was part of the county's call to investigate the company in July. Pepco received \$3 million from the state's public service commission and has so far completed 800 miles of tree-trimming along power lines — half of the 1,600 miles to cover the areas of service in the District and Montgomery and Prince George's counties. Nearly 4,500 of Montgomery County's power lines were downed by tree branches during the summer months.

"That work has been predominantly in Montgomery and focused in areas where circuits had the worst outage history this year," said Gary Keeler, Pepco's reliability program manager.

But where county residents will see the biggest improvements is in the length of an outage, Keeler said, due to the installation of automated switching devices.

"If a tree falls on a circuit, in many cases, customers in that area will experience only a momentary outage because their power supply automatically will be switched to another circuit," Keeler said. A \$15 million U.S. Department of Energy grant helped pay for adding the technology.

Maryland Public Service Commission Chairman Doug Nazarian announced in August that Pepco executives had revealed to him that their service ranked in the bottom quartile nationwide.

"I want to see them move from the lowest quartile of service to the top," Berliner said.

The new reliability plan increases spending by more than 81 percent, from \$141.5 to \$265.5 million, according to Pepco spokesman Bob Hainey. And though measures have already been put in place to improve reliability, the spending plan will not be adopted in full until Pepco's board of directors approves of it in early December.

According to Hainey, about \$75 million of that increase would go to the selective underground burying of power lines and upgrading power substations.

"Right now, about 75 percent of our high-voltage substations ensure that at least one of three supply lines as invulnerable as possible to power outages," Keeler said. "By the end of December, 100 percent of substations will have at least one hardened supply line."

According to Keeler, about 10,000 households are serviced via underground cables, but those have not been replaced since the 1970s. Another proposed \$15 million of the increased spending would go to continued tree-trimming operations.

“They are finally going to make the significant changes that our community deserves,” Berliner said. “Coming January, I will be the chairman of the Committee for Transportation, Infrastructure, Energy and Environment, and my first meeting will be hearing from Pepco and where we stand.”